

# MALI 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and grants individuals freedom of religion in conformity with the law. Following the 2020 coup d'état, the transition government adopted the Transition Charter in September 2020, which recognized the continued validity of the 1992 constitution's definition of the country as secular and continued to prohibit religious discrimination under the law. Following the May 2021 consolidation of military power, the subsequent transition government also upheld the validity of these founding documents. The law criminalizes abuses against religious freedom.

The transition government drafted a bill governing religious freedom and the exercise of worship; it was adopted as a draft law by the Council of Ministers in December 2021. The request for full adoption and implementation of the law was pending with the transition government as of the end of the year. This law would enable the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Worship, and Customs (MARCC) more easily to oversee religious organizations by having a primary role in adjudicating their registration with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MATD). Civil society organizations continued to report that the transition government and security forces struggled to tamp down the violence generated by extremist groups, including those with stated religious ideologies. The MARCC organized pilgrimages for Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims throughout the year. The High Islamic Council (HCI) organized conferences and workshops on countering violent extremism and regulating preaching with the support of the MARCC. The MARCC also renewed a training program for imams with the Moroccan government. The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission held its fifth public hearing in June, having heard a total of 32,300 individuals since its launch in 2014, including cases involving religious freedom violations.

Individuals affiliated with terrorist organizations, including those organizations designated as such by the U.S. government, used violence and launched attacks on civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others perceived as not adhering to the terrorists' interpretation of Islam. Particularly in the center of the country, the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) attacked

multiple towns in the Mopti and Segou regions and threatened Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities. Groups identified by authorities as extremist organizations targeted and closed government schools for their perceived “Western” curriculum and ordered the transformation of some of them into Quranic schools. In the regions of Mopti and Segou, groups identified as extremists reportedly continued observing verbal “peace” agreements previously entered into with local populations, with stipulations that permitted the local population to move freely throughout the area and practice their faith within prescribed limits in exchange for not challenging the groups’ territorial claims.

The Cadre for Action, Monitoring, Mediation, and Negotiation of Religious Denominations and Civil Society, an interfaith mediation network, advocated for peace and security in the country. Muslim religious leaders continued to condemn what they termed extremist interpretations of sharia, while non-Muslim religious leaders condemned what they characterized as extremism related to religion. Some Christian missionaries again expressed concern regarding the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist. Representatives of the Catholic organization Caritas stated such extremist groups forced women of all faiths to wear veils in some parts of the region of Mopti. Caritas characterized these developments as signs of the growing influence of extremist interpretations of Islam in Mopti, which they believed threatened the Christian community. Members of the Shia community continued to face discrimination from followers of different schools of Islam. Members of religious groups commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups. Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders jointly called for peace and solidarity among all faiths on religious holidays.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials discussed with transition government officials, religious leaders, and human rights organizations the importance and long-held tradition of interfaith dialogue as a tool to bring peace to the country. They underscored to these leaders their important role in promoting religious tolerance and freedom. The embassy supported programs to counter violent extremism related to religion and to address conflict and radicalization among vulnerable communities. The embassy met regularly with transition government officials charged with religious affairs and with representatives from religious minority associations operating in the country. In April, to commemorate the beginning of Ramadan, the Ambassador met with influential imams and women

religious leaders in Bamako, highlighting the role of religious leaders in confronting religious intolerance and promoting peace and released a statement on the important role religious leaders play in society.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.7 million (midyear 2022). According to the MARCC, Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni, and most follow Sufism; however, one prominent Shia imam stated that as many as 10 percent of Muslims are Shia. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Christians, of whom approximately two-thirds are Catholic and one-third Protestant; adherents to Kemetism, a revival of an Egyptian religion; groups with indigenous religious beliefs; and those with no religious affiliation. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints estimated its membership at 100 individuals. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country, mostly in rural areas. Syncretic beliefs are common with many Muslims and Christians also adhering to aspects of indigenous beliefs. The MARCC estimates fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital are associated with the Dawa al-Tablig, a subgroup of Sunni Islam.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution defines the country as a secular state, prohibits discrimination based on religion, and provides for freedom of religion in conformity with the law. Following the 2020 coup d'état, the transition government adopted the Transition Charter in September 2020, which recognized the continued validity of the 1992 constitution's definition of the country as secular and continued to prohibit religious discrimination under the law. Following the May 2021 consolidation of military power, the subsequent transition government also upheld the validity of these founding documents.

According to the penal code, any act of discrimination based on religion or any act impeding the freedom of religious observance or worship is punishable by up to five years' imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the

country). The penal code also states any religiously motivated persecution of a group of persons constitutes a crime against humanity.

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preferences or other legal benefits, and there is no penalty for not registering. To register, applicants must submit copies of a declaration of intent to create an association, notarized copies of bylaws, copies of policies and regulations, notarized copies of a report of the first meeting of the association's general assembly, and lists of the leaders of the association, with signature samples of three of the leaders. Upon review, if approved, MATD grants the certificate of registration.

The MARCC is responsible for administering the national strategy for countering violent extremism, promoting religious tolerance, and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction, but it permits private schools to do so. Privately funded madrassahs teach the standard government curriculum, as well as Islam. Non-Muslim students in these schools are not required to attend Islamic religious classes. Private Catholic schools teach the standard government curriculum and Catholic religious classes. Non-Catholic students in these schools are not required to attend Catholic religious classes. Informal schools, known locally as Quranic schools, which some students attend in lieu of public schools, do not follow a government curriculum and offer religious instruction exclusively.

The law defines marriage as secular. Couples who seek legal recognition must have a civil ceremony, which they may follow with a religious ceremony. A man may choose between a monogamous or polygamous marriage. The religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights, and civil courts consider these customs when they adjudicate such cases; however, many cases are settled informally.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

The transition government proposed a draft law on religious freedom and policies surrounding the free exercise of worship. The Council of Ministers adopted the draft law in December 2021 and the request for full adoption and implementation of the law was pending CNT approval as of year's end. The proposed law would enable the MARCC more easily to oversee religious organizations by having a primary role in approving their registration applications, as the registration process and review is currently managed by the MATD alone.

The MARCC, in coordination with the Archbishop of Bamako, Cardinal Jean Zerbo, organized the annual Catholic pilgrimage to Kita, which took place from November 19-20. Cardinal Zerbo, former Prime Minister Moussa Mara, and Minister of Religious Affairs, Worship, and Customs Mahamadou Kone took part in the pilgrimage, as did members of the Union of Young Malian Muslims (UJMA). As part of the pilgrimage, a UJMA representative marched from Kayes to Kita (approximately 250 miles) to demonstrate UJMA's support for interfaith dialogue. According to the Protestant church in the country, in May, the transition government assisted the church with approximately CFA 20 million (\$32,500) to hold a gathering of more than 50,000 Protestant believers in Bamako. In September, the transition government also funded the pilgrimage of Protestants to Jerusalem. According to the MARCC, in addition to providing technical assistance, the transition government funded travel, housing, and food for Muslims to travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage.

In June, the HCI held a workshop in collaboration with the MARCC aiming to assist preachers throughout the country in reducing extremist messaging that incites intolerance and violence. In September, the transition government assisted the HCI in organizing an international conference bringing together religious and community leaders from approximately 10 countries to discuss strategies for countering violent extremism that uses religious ideologies. The conference established a regional framework of religious and community leaders who will work together to counter violent extremism. The MARCC also renewed with the Moroccan government a training program for imams on preaching moderate interpretations of Islam. The agreement was signed in October to train 300 imams over five years.

In October 2020, the National Secretariat for the Prevention and the Fight Against Violent Extremism within the MARCC, with the assistance of the UN Development Program, launched a study of factors influencing extremism related to religion. In July 2021, using the results from the 2020 study, the transition government finalized a 2021-25 national action plan on countering and preventing violent extremism and terrorism that included interfaith efforts and the promotion of religious tolerance.

The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission held its fifth public hearing in June, covering cases relating to gender-based violence and child victims of the conflict. All public hearings were broadcast on national television. As of June 9, the commission had heard the testimony of a total of 32,300 individuals since its launch in 2014, including cases involving religious freedom violations. Political events in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing security concerns in the central and northern regions, a lack of transportation for victims, and a lack of access in camps for displaced persons limited the collection of testimony. The commission's mandate ended on December 31, with a final report expected in 2023.

Caritas representatives and some Protestant leaders stated that although there were far fewer Christians than Muslims in the country, they did not experience unequal treatment by the transition government, and in their opinion the transition government was adhering to the constitutional requirement to treat all religions equally. Transition government officials from the MARCC continued to emphasize and cite that the constitution and government practices provide for the freedom to worship and practice any religion, including the freedom to not engage in religious practices. During consultations on the draft constitution in November, the Coordination Framework for Islamic Associations (an umbrella group for Islamic associations) requested the transition government remove references to secularism, and instead establish Islam as the official religion of the country, including mandating teaching Islam and Arabic in the country's public education system. In response, the transition government repeatedly stated its commitment to retaining a secular framework in the constitution.

On October 31, a video circulated on social media showing Mamadou Dembele, an adherent to Kemetism, stepping on a Quran. Dembele advocated a return to African religions like Kemetism and dismissed Christianity and Islam as not true

religions of Africans. The same day, the general prosecutor opened an investigation into the incident, stating Dembele's comments were contradictory to freedom of religion and were designed to provoke tensions between Muslim and other communities. MARCC Minister Kone also condemned Dembele's comments, promised all faith communities that MARCC would remain involved, and called for calm. Transition President Assimi Goita on November 2 further condemned the action and comments and expressed sympathy with the Muslim community, while calling for a peaceful response. The Kemetism community also condemned Dembele's actions. The HIC held a peaceful demonstration in Bamako on November 4, with an estimated 40-60,000 people in attendance, to protest Dembele's comments and actions. Authorities also detained the leader of Kemetism in Mali, Fakoly Doumbia, on November 1 after he criticized Minister Kone's condemnation of Dembele's words and actions. On November 3, a Bamako court charged Doumbia and five other followers of Kemetism with "offenses of a religious nature capable of causing disturbance to public order." At year's end, Doumbia and the five others remained in detention pending further investigation.

The 147-member National Transition Council, the country's transition legislative body formed by the transition government in 2020, included four seats reserved for representatives of three religious associations. One seat is held by a Catholic, one by a Muslim, and two by Protestants. In October, 26 members were added to CNT, bringing the total to 147. The HCI objected to the CNT's decision to reserve a second seat for a Protestant member without also allocating an additional seat for a Muslim member.

### **Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

Throughout the year, mostly in the central and northern regions, domestic and transnational terrorist groups (including al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Din, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoune), united under the umbrella group JNIM, and the Islamic State in the Sahel (ISIS Sahel), both U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations, continued attacks on domestic and international security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. Both JNIM and ISIS-Sahel controlled significant territory in the northern and central regions. According to nongovernmental organizations and security experts,

armed groups in some instances coopted preexisting intercommunal and ethnic tensions to further sow instability and violence; therefore, it was not possible to attribute some incidents entirely to religious motives. Several of JNIM's public messages repeated an intent to govern the country according to sharia.

According to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali's (MINUSMA) Human Rights Protection Division (HRPD), terrorist groups forced populations under their control to pay taxes for local services that the groups referred called *zakat* (the traditional annual charitable contribution required of all Muslims) and enforced prohibitions on organizing local festivals, ceremonies, and listening to music. Women were often forced to wear full-face veils and body-covering clothing, and men were often forced to wear clothing which did not go past their ankles. According to MINUSMA, on May 9, in the village of Echelle in the Goundam subdivision of the Timbuktu region, 12 women who were not, in JNIM's view, wearing appropriate clothing received 20 lashes each, while 13 men wearing hairstyles or facial hair deemed inappropriate were forcibly groomed.

Civil society organizations continued to report that the transition government and security forces struggled to tamp down the violence generated by these extremist groups and that the actions of such groups limited the transition government's capacity to govern and bring perpetrators to justice, especially in rural areas.

A UN Secretary General's report released on March 30 cited at least nine instances of alleged extremist groups attacking mosques, imposing their beliefs on worshippers, and threatening severe punishments on anyone acting contrary to those beliefs. This practice was recorded in particular in the Douentza and Timbuktu Regions.

According to the media, on September 18, individuals affiliated with ISIS-Sahel, based on their interpretation of sharia, imposed a penalty of whipping on a couple accused of adultery, resulting in their deaths.

On November 20, a German priest, Hans-Joachim Lohre, was abducted in Bamako by unidentified individuals while on his way to attend Mass. His whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year. No group claimed responsibility. On November 24, police announced the arrest of two individuals in Bamako in the case, and the investigation was pending at year's end.



Several influential imams, civil society organizations, and transition government officials cautioned against divisive language that conflated certain ethnic groups, such as Fulani populations, with groups of violent extremists motivated by religious ideology. For example, in early April following a counterterrorism operation in the town of Moura that allegedly killed over 300 civilians, many of whom were Fulani, the army chief of staff, the civil society organization Tabital Pulaaku, and the HCI issued statements warning against conflating members of the Fulani community with terrorists.

According to Caritas, most Catholic churches in the country remained open throughout the year.

Islamist armed groups targeted and closed government schools that taught any curriculum not based on Islam, and many schools closed due to threats of violence or lack of adequate security. According to Caritas, schools that closed in prior years due to threats of violence or conflict had not reopened. As of year's end, according to UN reporting, 1,950 schools remained closed due to a lack of adequate security, affecting over 587,000 children. Most closures occurred in the Mopti and Menaka regions.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to Caritas, the Cadre for Action, Monitoring, Mediation, and Negotiation of Religious Denominations and Civil Society, formed as a mediation and negotiation network in 2020 and composed of Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and civil society leaders, continued advocacy for peace and security. For example, the president of the HCI and Cardinal Zerbo requested to visit 49 Ivoirian soldiers detained in the country, although their request went unanswered by transition authorities. These soldiers had arrived in the country in July in support of German peacekeepers and were detained on suspicion of being mercenaries.

Some Christian missionaries again expressed concern regarding the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist, which the missionaries said could affect their ability to continue working in the country over the long term. Caritas representatives reported that terrorist and other armed groups targeted persons throughout the country regardless of religious affiliation. They said the Catholic Church moved priests in

terrorist-controlled Minta to different locations for their safety. Protestant leaders noted Christians being banned from farming onions in Yorosso by local residents who believed onion farming was against their tradition and customs.

Caritas leaders expressed concern about terrorist groups strengthening control of the subdistricts of Koro, Bankass, Bandiagara, and Douentza following agreements signed with the local population in 2021 and earlier. The agreements imposed taxes for local services, which the groups called as *zakat*, and afforded decision-making and territorial authority to terrorist and other armed groups in exchange for not attacking the local population and allowing their freedom of movement throughout the territory. These leaders said they feared that terrorists would impose Islamic practices on those populations in the future. Caritas and Protestant church leaders cited cases of imposition of veil wearing, tax payments, food collection, and the conscription of men into their groups in some parts of the region of Mopti as signs of the growing influence of Islam, which they viewed as a threat to Christian communities. Protestant church leaders and Caritas reported similar problems in the north and central regions, where terrorist and other armed groups imposed Islamic practices and collected taxes, which they called religious, to pay for local services.

According to a member of the UJMA, local Shia Muslims often continued to face discrimination from followers of different schools of Islam that perceived Shia practices to be incorrect.

Members of religious groups commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders jointly called for peace and solidarity among all faiths at celebrations marking Christmas, the New Year, and Eid al-Fitr.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. embassy continued to encourage the transition government to promote interfaith dialogue and to maintain a tradition of religious tolerance. The embassy also continued to highlight the importance of countering violent extremism related to religion, including through working with the MARCC to support programs with this goal. Embassy officials worked with vulnerable communities to build their ability to address conflict, radicalization, and religious

violent extremism. For example, a program partner trained 429 religious leaders in conflict mediation and advocacy in the Timbuktu region. After the training, each leader conducted a session with the community on conflict mediation.

During the year, religious leaders actively participated in an embassy program to counter disinformation on COVID-19 and to promote COVID-19 prevention and vaccination. The embassy partnered with networks such as Union des Radios et Televisions Libres du Mali and Studio Tamani on activities and broadcasts to counter disinformation. This programming included multiple broadcast roundtables, several of which included religious leaders. The embassy also funded an internet program that organized a special roundtable discussion with religious leaders.

The Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with a wide range of religious leaders and human rights organizations to promote religious tolerance and freedom, including members of the HCI and other imams, the Association of Muslim Women, Caritas, and Protestant leadership. They urged religious leaders to advocate for tolerance and peace among various social and religious groups.

In April, to commemorate the beginning of Ramadan, the Ambassador met with influential imams and women religious leaders in Bamako, highlighting their role in confronting challenges, such as insecurity fueled by religious intolerance and in promoting peace through increased civic education. The Ambassador also hosted an iftar, bringing together Muslim leaders from throughout the country. The embassy donated sugar to several mosques and religious leaders throughout Bamako and assisted the MARCC in organizing an iftar for foreign diplomats and religious leaders.

The embassy highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity on its social media platforms throughout the year. In January, the embassy's American Center hosted a panel discussion with an American English teacher and Malian resident in honor of National Religious Freedom Day in the United States. The panel aimed at reinforcing participants' understanding of religious freedom and why it is important. It also provided participants an opportunity to learn more about the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which guarantees the fundamental freedom to openly practice one's faith. In August, for the International Day Commemorating Victims of Violence Based on Religion

or Belief, the embassy hosted an English-language conversation club that focused on the similarity between the United States' and Mali's multicultural, multireligious societies. Other embassy-hosted English-language conversation clubs featured discussions about religious freedom, tolerance, and community dialogue.